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U.S. Sanctions on Iran Not a 'Big Stick'

When U.S. hopes for a United Nations economic embargo of Iran were dashed by the Soviet veto, the Carter administration stoutly declared that the United States would go it alone.

What the White House neglected to say was that the "big stick" of U.S. sanctions may turn out to be a rubber billy club. The revolutionary regime in Iran had already reduced trade with the United States to the point where a total cutoff won't really punish the Iranians — and may even play into the hands of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Trade data from the Commerce Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Congressional Research Service show how laughable it is to suggest that a U.S. trade embargo would bring the mad mullah to his knees, much less put the fanatic captors of the American embassy in a more reasonable frame of mind.

"It appears that exports to Iran have fallen off so significantly as to reduce Iranian vulnerability to a U.S. trade embargo," states an internal CRS analysis.

For example, in 1978 Iran purchased \$1.4 billion worth of machinery and transport equipment from American firms. In the first nine months of 1979, due largely to the chaos created by the revolution, it bought only \$326 million. The purchase of electric generating equipment totaled \$223 million in 1978, but only \$15 million in the first three quarters of last year.

The fundamentalist Khomeini wants to put the brakes on the rapid industrialization pushed by the deposed shah.

Industrial production has been reduced by 60 percent at some sites, and further U.S. technological cutoffs might help the ayatollah's efforts to throw his nation's economy back into the Middle Ages.

"It appears that Iran could survive any unilateral U.S. punitive economic efforts, even though it may impose temporary hardships in some sectors," another internal report warns. One such hardship sector might be food — but President Carter has ruled out a food embargo. And even here, a U.S. boycott would have limited effect, knowledgeable sources informed my associate Tony Capaccio.

Iran would be most susceptible to a cutoff of rice, and feed grains — corn and soybeans — vital to poultry production. While a shortage of poultry feed might cripple that already shaky industry, the Iranians hedged against this possibility by buying up huge stores of such grains from the United States in the months before the embassy seizure.

If Carter decides to use food as a weapon, the most effective ammunition would be rice. The kind preferred by Iranians is in short supply worldwide. But the Iranian view of life as a vale of tears — as one Iranian academic described it — "If any place seems quiet, happy and peaceful, it is only because bad news is slow in arriving" — would classify a shortage of rice as simply one more spiritual test to be endured.

And of course the Iranians have another, quite worldly cure for any U.S. attempt to boycott them into submission singlehandedly: With their oil bil-

lions, they can pay whatever price is demanded for goods on the world market.

In short, a solo embargo by the United States won't buy tickets home for the American hostages.